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ABSTRACT

The writing program at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor) is based on the idea that writing is taught best when it is emphasized in every discipline. There is an upper division writing requirement, and all departments design and teach advanced writing courses. In 1978, at the same time that the program was created, an outreach program to schools statewide was also begun. The dialogues with teachers from all disciplines that have taken place during the outreach program have produced five specific suggestions to improve the teaching of writing: (1) develop a profile of the teacher of writing that will fit anyone in any discipline, (2) provide a rich range of contexts for writing, (3) capitalize on native knowledge of language as a bridge for students into written form, (4) clarify both audience and purpose of writing assignments, and (5) make what is known about writing accessible to others as the basis of dialogue between disciplines. A 1981 writing conference that grew out of the outreach program reaffirmed the importance of the Michigan program as a model for other schools. (JL)

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Writing at the Center of the Curriculum: The Michigan Program

By
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"To be confronted with a wrong symbol can undo an inward vision."[1]
Susanne Langer

Early in the Fall I began collecting material to prepare this description of the Michigan writing program with special emphasis on our outreach effort to other schools. With schedules and reports of visits to schools assembled across my desk, I copied the title I had agreed to write about at the top of the page and realized that something was wrong...already. At first I resisted the sense of uneasiness and tried to set down a straightforward description of the University's writing program, but it was no use; I would have to figure out what was wrong with the title for the paper before I could go any farther. Finally I located the source of my dilemma: The words "at the center" form an inaccurate image of how writing in our curriculum actually functions; at Michigan the writing program is a part of all disciplines and, in our view, quite properly at the center of none.

In reality, the writing program at Michigan is embedded in the curriculum in two ways: The existence of a continuum of writing requirements for all undergraduates promotes the idea that instruction in writing must be an ongoing, developmental concern through all levels of academic study, while the establishment of a network of writing courses offered by all departments provides substantial proof that writing is, in fact, important to all faculty in every discipline. Thus, writing is not at the center of our undergraduate curriculum but is, instead, integrated throughout it.

The Michigan Program

At Michigan new writing requirements for the entire College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (LSA), which has an undergraduate enrollment of 15,000, were overwhelmingly approved by the faculty in January of 1978; the collegiate writing program affects students from entrance to the College through their final years of study in their areas of concentration. At entrance, students compose an hour-long essay which determines their placement into the continuum of requirements in writing; each freshman and transfer entrant is placed into a small tutorial class, an Introductory Composition class, or into a group exempted from lower division writing requirements. Approximately 7% of entering students place into tutorial, nearly 13% are exempted, and the remaining 80% take Introductory Composition. All students without exception, however, are required to complete a junior/senior level writing course, preferably in their areas of concentration.

The presence of an upper division writing requirement significantly alters the climate for writing instruction in the College. Because all faculty accepted responsibility for teaching undergraduates the forms of organization and argumentation appropriate to their own fields, and because all departments now design and teach advanced writing courses, students no longer are able to maintain that effective writing is a matter of concern only for English teachers. Evidence abounds that writing is important everywhere: During the 1981-82 academic year, more than one hundred and thirty junior/senior level writing courses are available in every

discipline for election by undergraduates who know that they must be certified as competent writers in one of these courses before they can graduate.

At the same time that the faculty of the College voted to begin teaching writing in all disciplines, the idea of conducting an outreach program to schools statewide was also introduced and endorsed by the faculty. The English Composition Board (ECB),[2] charged with putting the College's new program in place and overseeing its quality, was asked to offer help in the teaching of writing to secondary schools and community colleges throughout the state. Two purposes were to be served by such offers: First, LSA faculty felt that discussions with feeder schools about the nature and purpose of new entrance and graduation requirements at the University were vital to preparation of potential entrants to the College. Second, the faculty believed that teachers throughout Michigan were likely to have the same concerns about developing writing ability in their students, and that discussions among schools statewide would substantially extend and reinforce the University's renewed attention to literacy.

Thus, an outreach program was launched in the Spring of 1978 with invitations to all secondary schools, colleges, and universities in the state to send representatives to a day-long conference in Ann Arbor for discussions about the new undergraduate writing requirements. Although a conference seemed to us to be a sensible first step, we feared that the turnout for such an event might be small: teachers invited to our conference would need to find substitutes, schools at any significant distance from Ann Arbor

might be unwilling to provide funds for travel for such an occasion, and the University itself might not appear to be the most appropriate setting for discussing how well secondary students write. At the very least, teachers with 35-40 students in each of five classes every day are aware that they survey a far different academic landscape than teachers in a university.

Despite our doubts, almost 600 teachers and administrators from 225 schools came to our campus on 2 May 1978 to listen to representatives of the ECB describe the University's new plan to teach writing. At the close of a day of lively conversations, the ECB was able to offer (through the generosity of the Mellon Foundation) to visit schools at no cost to them to talk to any or all of their faculty about how writing can be integrated into the entire curriculum. We simply asked to be invited.

Fortunately, we didn't receive 600 separate invitations all at once since only ten of us were prepared to meet the requests; however, in the course of three years we have received and fulfilled approximately 300 requests to visit schools in the state. On that Spring day in 1978 we had begun an exciting and exhausting adventure.

Most of the schools we have visited during these years were not planning to reform their entire curricula; instead, they hoped to find ways to extend and improve instruction in writing within their present curricula. Though the goals of schools were strikingly similar, we discovered that resources for carrying out plans to improve curricula were dramatically different. We came to understand that the creation of a network of schools could provide a much-needed connection and support for teachers throughout Michigan.

Outreach

Since Michigan was enjoying one of its steamiest summers in 1978, we could attribute some of our anxiousness to the accumulated effects of heat and humidity; but the truth was that we were nervous. We did our best to reduce that nervousness by developing and re-developing our presentation: handouts, examples of student writing, research on composition, and sample writing assignments. Then, overprepared, we became cautiously optimistic.

The first two schools on that original outreach journey were visited by four of us: Jay Robinson, Chair of the English Department, Bernie Van't Hul, Director of Introductory Composition, Fran Zorn, Staff Director for the ECB, and me. We left Ann Arbor at 7 a.m. to arrive by 8:30 a.m. at a rambling brick surburban school outside of Detroit. I recall now that the school's environment reminded me of an Andy Hardy film set: sloping hills, grassy playing fields, high windowed classrooms. Jay and Bernie delivered that first presentation with sensitivity and persuasive orderliness. We learned that the majority of students went on to college and that our presence while teachers planned for the new semester was welcome; teachers from all disciplines talked with us from 9:00 a.m. til 3:00 p.m. about finding ways to expand the teaching of writing into all subjects. Day One ended with good feeling all around.

On the following day we had to search hard on our filling station map for the route to the school designated #2 on our schedule; for some time the crossroad we were searching for didn't seem to exist. But with the help of several roadside storeowners

we arrived exactly on time at an isolated concrete building outside a small town north of Detroit called Marine City.

The moment we entered the front doors of the school we knew something was wrong. The halls were dead and the silence was ominous. When we entered the library where we were scheduled to talk, teachers sat in tight, separated clusters and glanced at us with the barest show of interest. Jay asked the principal about the nonreceptive atmosphere we could all feel, and he told us what he and his teachers faced:

The night before, a school millage vote had been defeated for the third time. The impact of the defeat upon these teachers was swift and stunning; nearly one tenth of their faculty would be gone by the next day. Even as we talked to them that morning they would be learning who among them would teach that year and who would not. In such a situation, we said, surely our presence must be intrusive; we offered to leave. But the teachers asked us to stay; they still wanted to talk about how their students could learn to write better even if they might not be employed by tomorrow.

We discovered that very few graduates of this school went on to college--most of them attended vocational schools or found work in Detroit. All that day we talked together about students' beliefs about writing, about language learning, composing processes, and making assignments that met the expectations of audiences in and beyond schools.

As I looked out the window of the library that day, I could see the main street; it was a far different movie set than yesterday's. Here was a Gary Cooper Western with dust and papers swirling

toward a grey diner attached to a railroad station. Yet inside the school's library, teachers' questions were the same as those we had heard the day before: How can we make students want to write more? What can we do about improving reading as well as writing ability? What can we do about the powerful, negative impact of television on the literacy of our students? How can we convince students that writing is an important skill to have in the world outside of school?

These questions, important on those first two days of outreach, have recurred again and again in different settings. From our dialogues with teachers from all disciplines have come five specific suggestions to improve the teaching of writing:

Develop a profile--a comfortable model--of the teacher of writing that will fit anyone teaching in any discipline;

Provide a rich range of contexts for writing;

Capitalize on native knowledge of language as a bridge for students into written forms; de-mystify the range of textual cues readers expect to find in written texts;

Clarify both the audience and the purpose of writing assignments to reduce students' anxiety and malaise;

Make what we think and learn about writing accessible to each other as a basis of dialogue between disciplines, between teachers, and between schools and communities.

Occasionally we had an opportunity to talk with students during subsequent ECB outreach visits and to collect their

observations about writing which were very like statements we had heard from undergraduates interviewed at Michigan prior to the passage of new writing requirements:

I think faster than I can write my ideas down;

The topics aren't interesting;

My spelling always gets me in trouble;

I don't know what the teacher wants;

I keep shifting my tenses;

I don't have strong opinions on things I'm supposed to write about;

My writing bores me, too.

Everywhere, reports from teachers and reports from students appear to coincide; these reports focus on issues of motivation, purpose, and response. For instance: "Writing is a difficult craft for anyone to master, especially when a real sense of communication is absent" or "Freedom to write without worrying about mistakes makes writing less frightening." And, finally, teachers said, when audiences for student writing can be identified beyond the classroom, composing is a process with more purpose than performance on school examinations.

The Conference--Extension of Outreach

In June of 1981 after three years of outreach visits and five well-attended workshops for Michigan teachers, the Mellon

Foundation funded two 3-day workshops on either side of a three day national conference on Literacy in the 1980's. The ECB invited teachers and administrators from throughout the country for the first 3-day workshop and from the state of Michigan for the concluding workshop. All participated in the central three days of the conference. Audrey Roth, a participant from Miami-Dade Community College, wrote a long report of her experience in Ann Arbor for the Newsletter of the Florida Council of Teachers of English. I quote a small portion of it here:

> And now I ponder the experience. I know that being on a university campus gave both workshops and conference an elan they would have lacked were the same program offered in a hotel setting. I know that I heard many good ideas worth trying out in my classes--and I envy others that simply aren't applicable (such as the senior writing course in the discipline that is a student's major). I know that there were failures along the way that weren't mentioned (and which we were told in advance wouldn't be). I think what continues to interest me most about the experience is the like-mindedness of people who teach many different courses on many different grade levels--and how the ECB at The University of Michigan has managed to draw together both people and ideas through its school visits and on-campus workshops.[3]

It may be that many schools will, in time, duplicate the entire Michigan plan; it is more likely that most schools will, like some of the 92 colleges and universities which have already inquired, identify specific parts of the program which can be fit well into their own existing systems. In either case, the idea that writing is taught best when it is emphasized in every discipline has obviously captured the imagination of teachers; they envision a network of courses in all disciplines, perhaps even across school systems, which will be strengthened by a common commitment: helping students learn to write as well as they can.

NOTES

[1]Langer, Susanne, Feeling and Form, N.Y., 1953, p. 387.

[2]LSA faculty who have served on the English Composition Board during 1976-82 include: Professor Daniel Fader, English; Professor Thomas Dunn, Chemistry; Professor Wilbert McKeachie, Psychology; Professor David Shappirio, Biological Sciences; Professor Harriet Mills, Far Eastern Languages; Professor Libby Douvan, Psychology; Professor Peter Clarke, Communication; Professor Larry Eisendrath, Communication; Professor Jay Robinson, English; Professor Vern Carroll, Anthropology.

[3]Roth, Audrey, "Literacy, Learning and Loving It in Michigan," Florida Council of Teachers of English Newsletter, September, 1981, p. 9.